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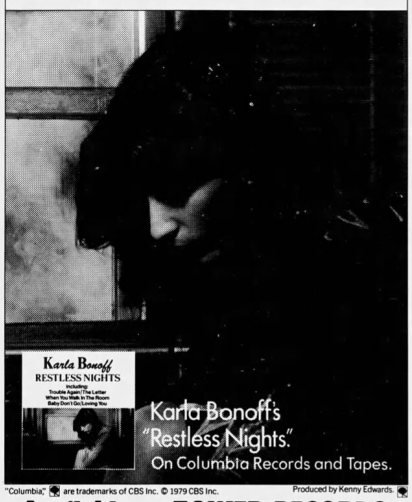


Karla Bonoff's "Restless Nights." On Columbia Records and Tapes.

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# ROCK MAGS: CRYING OVER SPILLED INK

BY WAYNE ROBINS

Rock journalism used to be defined by the sensibility of four publications. There was the Boston-Cambridge academic approach of Fusion Magazine; the urban acid-head visions of New York's Crawdaddy; the Midwest anti-intellectual populism of Creem from Birmingham, Mich.; and the ambitious hippie lifestyle orientation of San Francisco's Rolling Stone.

Fusion folded years ago. Crawdaddy went through at least a dozen restless incarnations before finally changing its name to Feature Magazine before going out of business last year. Creem has become a teen fan magazine with a nasty streak, and Rolling Stone left San Francisco for a Fifth Avenue office and access to the advertising and ego power of Manhattan.

The function of rock magazines has also changed over the years. Crawdaddy, Rolling Stone, Fusion and Creem were the lightning rods of an alternative culture, one that took rock 'n' roll as seriously as a form of artistic expression as the "establishment" took books, movies and painting. Now that rock is acknowledged as a potent force in both American culture and business, the need to proselytize about its merits in specialized magazines doesn't have the same urgency as it did even five years ago.

Of course, it's important to distinguish between rock magazines, fan magazines and fanzines. The fan magazines are lucrative survivors, such as 16 and Tiger Beat, and concern themselves primarily with photos, contests and bios of this month's teen idols. Their function has more to do with the marketing of personalities than the primacy of the music.

Rock magazines may at times show signs of the fan magazines' worshipful tone, but are occasionally redeemed by the exercise of critical judgment. Fanzines traditionally are written by and for people obsessed with a certain genre of pop culture. Some rock fanzines which started as mimeographed sheets have, however, grown into full-scale magazines, which is why some will be mentioned here.

HIT PARADER (Derby, Conn.). This venerable publication is a mixed bag. Layout can be sloppy, the photos fuzzy, the articles at times press release-like in tone. But Hit Parader often manages a balance between pandering to its teen audience and expanding the horizons of that audience. In addition to articles in the latest issue on teen favorites such as Kiss, Peter Frampton, Wings and Aerosmith's Joe Perry, there's an insightful interview with avant-garde rock musician Robert Fripp and a feature on soul singer James Brown.

CIRCUS (New York). This magazine has been through a series of changes over the last decade. First it was little more than a fan magazine, aimed primarily at male, hard rock-loving teens. About three years ago, it decided to expand its approach to movies, television and life style in addition to music. But it never did develop the more mature readership it was aiming for. A little more than a year ago it attempted weekly publication, but that drained the magazine's resources almost to the breaking point. Circus is back as a twice-monthly, with music features once again the bread and butter. The decline in the amount of glossy full-color pages underlines Circus' budget problems, and the editorial content is undistinguished.

CREEM (Birmingham, Mich.). It should be noted that Creem was my favorite magazine until I became its editor for a few months in 1975. Somehow, living in a suburb of Detroit working for what is brazenly called "America's Only Rock 'n' Roll Magazine" didn't turn out to be the journalistic romance I'd hoped it would be. I'm not the most objective observer in this case, but it seems that Creem has abandoned the feisty literary tradition that made it, for a while in the early 1970s, one of rock's best magazines.

Under the leadership of founding editor Dave Marsh (most recently a Rolling Stone editor and biographer of Bruce Springsteen), Creem attracted some awesomely original writers and critics, such as Greil Marcus and Lester Bangs, who masterfully adapted the self-destructive beatnik impulse to the rock aesthetic. Bangs' idiosyncratic rantings have been absorbed as the Creem style, but in the hands of so many lesser writers and editors, the tone is often abrasive, cruel and juvenile. Photos and layout are still fairly good, and it still carries Robert Christgau's indispensible monthly Consumer Guide.

ROLLING STONE (New York). Rolling Stone had become an institution long before it left San Francisco. It has been highly erratic over the years. Many superb editors and writers have come and, abruptly, gone, the result of inevitable personality conflict with publisher and editor-in-chief Jann Wenner.

The magazine has often moved far afield from popular music, with a strong emphasis on liberal political concerns and film personalities. Although the editing style tends to give many of the articles an arbitarily bland tone, this works to Rolling Stone's advantage in maintaining continuity from issue to issue in the manner of Time or Newsweek. The magazine is finally taking a more activist stance in reporting on the record business, on whose advertising the magazine depends despite moderately successful attempts at ad diversification.

The mildly gossipy Random Notes are always a worthwhile read. The magazine's most essential section, the record-review pages, continues to be uneven, with many of the writers assuming a stance that indicates their feelings of superiority to the music they review.

NEW YORK ROCKER (New York). This began as something of a fanzine devoted to covering the emerging New York punk-rock bands. But under founding editor Alan Betrock and present publisher and editor Andy Schwartz, Rocker has grown

*Please Turn to Page 105*

# SLASHING WITH COMMITMENT

SLASH (Los Angeles). If you're looking for calm, unbiased reportage, forget Slash. But if you're committed to music as an important tool of social change, this is the magazine for you. Chief editor Claude Bessy and a staff of equally fiery, articulate contributors voice strong opinions with passion, humor and precision. They cover local and visiting punk-rockers in sharp, Q&A-format interviews, record and concert reviews and rambling, rambunctious editorials, supported by excellent photos and clean design. Slash has recently branched out to look at related disciplines such as avant-garde film and performance art.

—KRISTINE McKENNA

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